

The Harlot's Potion

by yutamiyu

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Part I

Chapter 1 of 1

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Author's Note: Response to the WIKTT "Harlot's Potion" challenge. Comments and constructive criticism are not only highly appreciated and welcomed, but (especially for the latter) desperately sought. Rated R for later chapters.

Disclaimer: Plain and simple, nothing you recognize is mine (it is, of course, J.K. Rowling's). Everything you don't is. Savvy?

Fall was the hottest that Hogwarts had seen in a century.

September nineteenth was no different.

"Fantastic way to spend a birthday," Hermione groaned, as she fanned herself with an old copy of the *Daily Prophet*. The heat had spoiled her appetite for the breakfast before her, and she pushed it away and into the center of the table. The boy who lived put down his glass and grinned.

"All right there, Hermione?" he teased, lifting his chin towards her unruly hair. "You're looking a bit frazzled."

She narrowed her eyes at him. "I can't help it that my hair gets like this when it's hot," she spat, though her eye still held a twinkle of humor. "We can't all have perfect hair like yours." Pot, she thought. Kettle. Black. She turned to the redhead sitting next to her. "Right, Ron?"

Ron Weasley looked up from his breakfast and chuckled, taking another bite. "Speak for yourself, Hermione," he managed around a mouthful of food, and then took the time to swallow. "Mine's just fine. It's better than Harry's, at any rate." He took another bite.

"How can you manage to eat breakfast?" Hermione pondered, awestruck. "It's too hot to do anything!"

"My stomach has always taken priority, Hermione. You know that." He put down his fork and grabbed the paper from her hand, beginning to fan himself. "But bloody hell, it's really hot out!"

The heat wave had taken its toll on every student in the school. Cooling charms kept bodies and rooms from overheating, but there was nothing that could be done for the psychological effects of a heat wave. The Great Hall was noticeably quieter than usual, most likely due to the fact that most of the students were lethargic, and Hermione noticed that she was not the only one who forwent breakfast. Even the faculty was less than their best; she noticed that poor Professor Flitwick's hair was suffering the

same frizzy fate as hers, and the normally-pristine Professor McGonagall had a few gray hairs out of place. Even the Headmaster looked as though he were contemplating losing a few inches of facial hair.

She stole a glance at the Head Table and noticed the faculty deeply engaged in conversation, and idly wondered what could possibly hold each faculty member's attention this early in the morning.

Hermione was not afforded time to ruminate long, however, as a squawk filled the Great Hall as the morning owls arrived. A storm of letters fell to each of the four House tables, as did several brown packages. Hermione received a copy of the day's *Daily Prophet* and began to fan herself with it, grateful to have one again. Pigwidgeon fluttered around nervously before finally landing on Hermione's head and dropping a package into her abandoned breakfast.

Harry reached across the table and scooped up the diminutive owl. "It's strange," Harry mused, "that Pig hasn't grown much more than he was the day you got him."

"Bloody terrible owl," Ron grumbled. "Now he's delivering *Hermione's* mail. What's that ruddy cat of yours for, then?"

Hermione chose to ignore her friend and picked the package off of the plate, wiping off the traces of breakfast that stuck to it. She read the label and handed it to Ron. "It's for you," she said simply and began to try and salvage her food-stained robes.

"It's from Fred and George," Ron stated, running a finger over the "Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes" return label. Tearing open the package, he pawed through it and pulled out a large plastic bag filled with balloons. He handed it to Harry and kept rooting through the package.

"Weasleys' Water Wonders?" Harry mused, flipping the package over in attempts to find more information.

Ron shrugged. "You've got me, Harry," he replied. Finally, his hand emerged from the package clutching a small piece of parchment. "Well, wait a minute. There's a note." He laid it on the table, and Hermione and Harry leaned over to read it.

Ron:

Heard that Hogwarts is a scorcher. Thought you might enjoy these. They're from our new line-up.

Fill them with water and throw them at each other. It's popular with Muggles; Dad said so.

We've put minor spells in all of them, all temporary of course and mostly harmless. Try them out.

Love Fred (and George).

The three looked up from the note, and Ron tilted his head at the grin that had swept Harry's face.

"Brilliant," Harry breathed. "I never thought of having a water balloon fight here. The courtyard's perfect for it."

Hermione groaned. She'd never been one for water balloon fights. "But Harry," she ventured, "when are we going to have the time? N.E.W.T.s are coming up this year, and we all need to study. Plus, don't forget that we still have a full class schedule."

"But Hermione," Ron groaned, "it's too bloody hot to think! Never mind studying."

"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that, Ron," she replied briskly. Silence fell upon the three of them for a moment, and she sighed. "Look. If for some reason we find time to go out and throw water balloons at each other, then I'll join you." Ron grinned at her reply, and she hurriedly added, "But I'm not going to fight. I'll sit out there under a tree or something."

Harry rolled his eyes. "But that's boring, Hermione."

"Maybe to you. I happen to find it quite relaxing."

"Whatever," Ron huffed, reaching for the bag. "Give it here, Harry."

Hermione stole a glance at the Head Table and noticed that the teachers had finished with their conference. Several stood up and left the Great Hall. McGonagall's mouth was drawn in a thin, tight line, and her eyes reflected severe disappointment. The Headmaster pushed himself out of his chair and cleared his throat. The entire dining hall stopped their talking and looked up at him.

"Attention, everyone," Dumbledore said in a quiet yet highly authoritative voice. "The staff and I have just spoken and have come to the agreement that there will be no classes held today." The entirety of the Great Hall let out whoops of joy and clapped enthusiastically. Dumbledore held up his hands, and slowly the noise subsided. "Students are free to do as they wish today, though I must advise you that school rules still apply. As I speak, several of the teachers have left for the lake to contain the giant squid and the grindylows, and to also speak with Merchieftainess Murcus to acquire her assistance. As such, assuming the teachers are successful, students will be allowed to swim in the lake--" His eyes took on a stern expression, while still maintaining their signature twinkle. "--But only for today. I am certain that I do not have to emphasize the importance of staying out of the lake on any other day."

The students murmured to themselves, snippets of conversations of bathing suits and plans for the free day slowly filling the Hall.

Dumbledore continued. "Teachers will be posted around the grounds of Hogwarts to make sure there are no rules being broken." Harry could have sworn that the Headmaster was looking directly at him. "Furthermore, Madam Pomfrey has advised me that all students will need to take extra care to avoid being overheated today. We don't want half of the student body stuck in the hospital wing." He cleared his throat. "I wish for everyone to have fun on this day off, but remember to take care of yourselves. You are all dismissed." He sat back down and began to finish his breakfast as conversation began to pick up in the Great Hall again.

Ron jumped up and shook Hermione by her shoulder. "You hear that?" he asked gleefully. "You promised! You have to go outside with us today; no holing yourself up in that stuffy library."

Hermione groaned and put her head in her hands. "All right, all right," she finally managed, voice muffled by her frizzy hair. She looked up at her friends. "But I have to get changed. I'll meet you outside my room in twenty minutes." With that, she stood and began the walk to her room.

Hermione grunted as she rooted around her closet, unsuccessfully searching for her swimsuit.

Even now, she was amazed that she had brought it--she had never been a fan of them. Summer trips to beaches were spent in shorts and thin cotton shirts. She had never thought of hers as a body particularly fit for showcasing.

Hermione abandoned her fruitless search in the closet and moved to her bureau, hoping to have more luck. And indeed--she found it shoved in the back of one of the drawers. Sighing at having actually found it (and suddenly wishing she hadn't), she shook it out, running her hands over the material, trying desperately to make it less wrinkled. Sighing, she sloughed off her robes and tried it on.

She was amazed that the swimsuit still fit. She had bought it for the summer holiday after her fifth year. She had filled out a bit since then in her hips and breasts, but

somehow the suit still managed to cover her sufficiently enough. She stepped in front of the mirror, wondering how she looked.

The suit was a navy one-piece, and what once was high-cut neck now showed a bit more skin than she would have liked, but not enough to make her throw it away. It wasn't the best choice with her wiry brown hair, but somehow she managed well enough to not make her a laughing stock. Hermione's brow furrowed as she continued her examination. She was thin--perhaps a bit too thin, she thought dryly--and her skin was very pale; she supposed she could use a tan. Too risky, she decided, shaking her head and walking away from the mirror, rooting around in her closet again. Skin cancer and all that. She chuckled lightly to herself. Maybe Snape had the right idea, constantly keeping an almost ghostly hue.

Hermione finally emerged from her closet clutching a thin length of light blue and dandelion fabric, which she wrapped around her waist and tied into a clumsy knot resting on her right hip. Crossing to the bureau and picking up a hair elastic, she pulled her hair over her left shoulder and tied it in a low ponytail.

She heard the knock on the door and knew it could only be Ron and Harry. She opened the door for them.

"Hey, Hermione," Harry grinned, as he walked inside. "Can't believe you're actually going outside for a change."

Hermione rolled her eyes and stepped aside to allow entrance for Ron, who had been momentarily transfixed on the top half of her swimsuit. She hadn't missed that.

"Like I said before, Harry, don't expect me to get into that lake--lord knows what's in there--and I'm certainly not going to get in a water balloon fight with you. Who knows what kind of spells Fred and George put into those things. I, for one, don't trust them."

"So what are you going to do, then, Hermione?" Ron asked, looking around the room.

She pointed to a chair, and both boys' heads turned at the stack of books sitting atop it. "Some light reading," she stated, and her friends groaned.

"Oi! Hermione!" Ron called, waving at her. "If you don't get your nose out of that book, it's gonna lash out and attach itself to your face!"

Hermione looked up at him and glared, a smile flirting with her lips. Finally, she laughed. "It's a small price to pay in the pursuit of education! You should try it sometime!" she teased.

Ron grinned, and at that Harry pelted him with one of Weasleys' Water Wonders before jogging over to meet her under the tree.

"He's got a point, you know," he gently chastised. "You've been studying every free moment you have." He pinched a bit of her swimsuit away from her stomach. "You're not eating properly and it's beginning to show." He released it and ran a hand through his hair. "I hardly think you'll get less than O's--with additional marks--if you take a few hours off to just relax and have some fun." He paused. "Ron and I..." he continued quietly, "...we're both worried about you."

Hermione sighed and looked towards Ron, who had suddenly sprouted a fluorescent green beard and mustache. Courtesy of Weasleys' Water Wonders, she supposed, and chuckled. "It suits him," she teased before looking back at Harry. "Maybe you're right," she eventually conceded. "Give me a few minutes, though, all right? I want to return these books to my room." At his disbelieving gaze, she added, "I *swear*, Harry. Trust me?"

Finally, he bent and proffered his hand; she clasped it, and he pulled her to her feet. "Get out of here," he grinned. "And when you get back, Ron and I are going to make sure you have fun. And if you take more than fifteen minutes...well, I've got a Water Wonder with your name on it."

Hermione gathered her books and they parted company, her hair flying wildly behind her as she darted back towards the castle.

In the end, she detoured to the library, which was, to her chagrin, completely empty. Always the responsible one, Hermione had decided to return one of the books she had checked out days before, having read it ravenously. She made a mental note to seek out other books by the same author.

Surprisingly, Hermione found that lately she didn't just come to the library for research and studying purposes. The décor left her awestruck. She supposed it was because she'd read *Hogwarts: A History*, but she found herself drawn to the various busts surrounding the school. The library held busts of Hogwarts' old Headmasters. The academic in her, of course, wanted to know everything there was to know about these past leaders, but recently, the art connoisseur began to appreciate the beauty of the carved images.

"Miss Granger." The cold voice made her jump, and she whipped around to find herself cornered by her Potions professor. "It does not surprise me to find you in the library on your day off." He looked her over. "However, I find myself questioning your--" He raised an eyebrow and sneered, "--unusual choice of attire." He glanced around the area where he'd found her. "I don't see Mister Weasley or Mister Potter, and they always seem to be around when you're breaking rules." He paused, and his lip twitched. "I still think you're up to something. Ten points from Gryffindor. I do not want to see you in the library for the remainder of the day."

"That's not fair!" she exclaimed before she could catch herself.

He raised an amused eyebrow. "Fair, Miss Granger?"

She balled her hands into fists, holding them tightly at her side. She wasn't going to back down now. "Your evidence is entirely circumstantial. My record at this school will clearly indicate--"

"My job is not to care about your reputation at this school," he interrupted, "academic or otherwise." His eyes narrowed. "What are you hiding from me, Miss Granger? Why do you persist on keeping me here?" He quickly scanned the library.

"I'm not hiding anything!" she yelled, infuriated. "Why are you so hell-bent on punishing me for something I haven't even planned, let alone done?"

"Twenty further points from Gryffindor, Miss Granger. For insolence."

She gritted her teeth. "Spiteful. Hateful," she murmured. Then, louder, "Unjust!"

Snape's lips curled in a particularly ugly sneer. "A word of advice, Miss Granger. I would highly suggest that you refrain from speaking any further before you get yourself expelled." He paused, and a sort of sick amusement reflected briefly in his eyes. "Pity that such a brilliant mind came with such a foolish mouth." With that, he turned heel on her and walked out of the library, leaving her alone with her anger.

Hermione didn't have to stew for long. One of Weasleys' Water Wonders hit her in the back of the head and began soaking into her scalp. She instinctively raised her hands to wipe off what she could, and was amazed at how rapidly the few remnants absorbed into her hands.

She spun around to chastise her attacker--surely Harry or Ron--for throwing water around in the library, but was presented with an empty hallway. A bit annoyed, she began to run her fingers through her hair, hoping it wouldn't tangle. She idly wondered what sort of enchantment had been in the Water Wonder that hit her; perhaps she would grow a horrid beard, like Ron?

When her flesh began to burn, she screamed.

Snape heard a distant "Professor!" and then her rapid footfalls on the floor behind him. He stopped, grunted in exasperation, and turned.

"Miss Granger, I thought I made it perfectly clear that--"

His words, however, were forced back down his throat as she crushed her lips to his, tangling desperate fingers into his lank hair.

She was convinced. She had found Heaven, and this was clearly it: an abandoned hallway, locking lips with her Potions professor.

The signs were irrefutable. There was a distinct humming in her stomach, and she felt her cheeks warm. Suddenly, every cell in her body seemed to be on full alert, and she shivered.

The problem was, as much as her body was enjoying the act, her mind screamed protests of disgust.

Snape finally found the presence of mind to push her away, absolutely livid. "Miss Granger!" he barked, and his voice echoed in the corridors. "Fifty points from Gryffindor!"

For her part, Hermione looked positively petrified as she raised a trembling hand to her lips. "I kissed you," she murmured distractedly.

The sneer returned as Snape regained his composure. "I see that your momentary lack of judgment has not affected your ability to state the obvious," he snapped.

She looked back up at him, and something in her eyes made him extremely wary. She reached up and grabbed his neck, pulling him down to her, and their lips met once again. This time, Snape pushed more forcefully, and she fell to the ground.

"Detention!" he roared. "This evening, after dinner." With that he stormed down the corridors, leaving a bewildered Head Girl.

He burst into his office and clasped his hands on the edge of his desk, gritting his teeth as rage seethed from every point of his skin.

That impertinent girl! How dare she...! He scrubbed a hand over his face, as though he could remove the lingering traces of her. Snarling, he pushed himself away from his desk and tore through his cabinets, searching for his private store of Old Ogden's Firewhiskey. Finally finding it, he violently pulled the stopper and poured a good amount into a glass. He sighed, and brought his fingers to his temples, massaging. Slowly, he ran them to where his neck met his shoulder, trying to work out the kinks.

He needed a tension relieving potion.

Snape stalked into his private lab and reached to open the cabinet that held his private stores, when a discovery made him freeze.

They were already open.

Ravaged, he noted soon after, as he matched what was present with his mental inventory. Everything was in disarray. Bottles knocked over, smaller boxes torn through and quickly cast aside. Strangely, he found that only one item was missing.

Essence of viperfish.

His eyes narrowed. A legal ingredient, used to make various relaxation draughts. However--and the fact was known to few--that if the essence was brewed in the right amount, with the right combination of ingredients, the resulting potion could be used to control another's body. The properties of viperfish allowed the mind and body to relax simultaneously, while still remaining mentally sharp. However, if combined with other--highly illegal--ingredients, the results were disastrous.

Distracted with his thoughts, Snape abandoned any efforts to clean up the mess and went back into his office. He picked up his drink and finished it in one large swig, all but slamming the glass back down on the table. He began to pace.

Not many people knew about the hidden properties of viperfish essence. That he knew for sure. Potions masters, to be sure, but those who would actually use viperfish to that extent were few and far between. A handful of Death Eaters knew, but he couldn't think of one with enough interest to brew that kind of potion; surely they would have come to him? No; it had to have been done locally. No one at Hogwarts was smart enough to muddle out the usage...

He stopped dead in his tracks.

Granger?

It was a possibility, he noted. She had access to the restricted section of the library, and he was confident she had devoured every book in it. But why would she want to brew such a dangerous potion? Who could she possibly want to control?

With a new sense of determination, Snape sat at his desk and began grading first year essays. He would know soon enough.

Hermione swiped a hand across her eyes as she stopped at the door to the Potions classroom. Her anger, while it had subsided, had not left her completely. She was well aware that she deserved the detention--she had jumped her professor!--but she didn't agree with the deduction of points that had started the fiasco. Her mind was made, and she would continue to contest the fact.

She was a little wary about serving detention with Professor Snape. When he had left her in the library, the hum in her belly and warmth in her cheeks had quickly receded, and did not, to her delight, resurface for the remainder of the day.

She had not told Harry, or Ron, about her encounter with him in the library. There would no doubt be an outcry, worsened by the fact that it was--she swallowed and finally admitted it--entirely her fault. That's what she despised more than anything; that Snape had given her a detention that she had not only deserved, but had actually *earned*.

She started to feel flush again as the realization hit her once more. Detention. With Snape. Alone. Hermione shook her head in attempt to clear the thoughts and groaned in frustration.

"Miss Granger." He seemed to take delight when she startled. How long had he been standing in the doorway, watching her? Why hadn't she heard the door creak open? "Do you plan on standing there empty-headed all night?"

Hardly empty-headed, she thought wryly, but responded with, "No, sir."

"I would hope not," he retorted. "I, for one, do not have the luxury of that option." He moved from the door and waited for her to follow. When he had closed--and locked?--the door behind her, he continued.

"I found myself at a loss coming up with an appropriate detention for your...transgression," he sneered. "Normally my detentions involve making various potions; hardly punishment for you. I would have you cleaning, but a--" He gritted his teeth. "--particularly gifted third year finished that yesterday evening." His jaw unclenched and he fixed her with a glare. "However, I have found a use for you."

Snape walked towards a tapestry and murmured something she could not hear. The tapestry moved out of the way to reveal a door, and he stood next to it, staring at her, eyebrow raised.

Private quarters? she thought, disdained, as a thousand scenarios played themselves out in her head. She didn't like any of them, but the hum and heat had returned as she walked through the door. She was pleased, however, when they stopped in his lab.

"Why are we here?" she posed. "Everything looks in order..." She lifted her chin at the open ingredients stores. "Unless you mean for me to clean that?"

The sneer returned, and mentally, Hermione bristled. "I want you to tell me why you stole my viperfish essence."

Her eyes widened. "You were robbed?"

"Answer the question, Miss Granger," he snapped, clearly becoming impatient. Which is strange, she thought. What is he hiding?

"I don't know," she responded. "I had no idea you'd even been robbed." At his glare, she continued. "I've been outside all day, except for when you caught me in the library to give me this ridiculous detention. I've not been near the dungeons at all."

"You're lying," he growled. "You reek of viperfish. And I'm certain that it wasn't on tonight's dinner menu."

Hermione brought her hair to her nose and sniffed, then followed with her hands. Her brow furrowed. "Well, I certainly don't smell anything. And I don't know why I would smell like it, anyway," she replied. She opened her mouth to say more, but found she could not speak. The hum coiled tightly around her stomach as she realized that he had yet to release her from his penetrating gaze.

What is going on? her mind screamed.

Finally, Snape looked away from her and began to tidy up the discarded ingredients. "Surely you know of the alternate uses of viperfish essence?" he pressed.

Hermione nodded slowly. "I do...yes," she admitted, "but does that mean that I stole from your private stores?" Wouldn't be the first time, her mind chimed in. She shook her head. "Surely you don't think I would make that kind of potion," she finished.

He turned to face her again. "I wouldn't put it past you, Miss Granger," he sneered. "You would make any potion you could if you only had the ingredients. All in your 'pursuit of higher learning.' It's highly conceivable that you would brew this dangerous kind of potion simply because you could."

"But I didn't!" she exclaimed. "I was with Harry and Ron all day!"

"Accomplices?"

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut in frustration. How could he do this to her? "You know that's not true," she replied.

The sound of his palms slapping into the table caused her eyes to fly open and lock onto him again. "TELL ME!" he roared. "Did Potter and Weasley put you up to this? Have some fun at Snape's expense?"

Hermione's eyes widened. The kiss. He wanted to know why she'd kissed him.

Slowly, she shook her head. "I don't know why...it happened," she started, unsure of how to proceed. "It was the strangest thing. The first time you started to leave, I...someone threw something at me. It got all over my face and hands." She looked down at them, holding them up, examining them. "And it started absorbing into my skin, faster than anything I've ever known." She stopped talking as her body began to feel hot again. Was it fever?

Snape slowly began to straighten, comprehension starting to make itself known in his eyes.

"And then what?" he asked cautiously.

"And then..." She brought her hands to her cheeks, reveling in the feel of their cool flesh against flushed. "...And then it started burning. My entire body started burning. It was painful. I ran to get you, to see if you knew what was happening, and when I finally caught up with you..." She dropped her hands to her sides. "...My body just reacted and I...kissed you." She paused and seemed to withdraw into herself. "Why did I do that?" she mused. "And why was it YOU?"

"I'm glad you found the experience pleasurable," he retorted dryly.

She looked directly into his eyes. "That's just it!" she exclaimed, grasping his hand between both of hers. "I *did*! It's like...my body and my mind have two entirely different opinions. When I was kissing you, my body was...excited. But in my mind, I couldn't figure out why it was happening. All I knew was that I had to kiss you."

She was still holding on to his hand. Silence filled the room, and neither made any effort to move out of their current situation.

The heat in Hermione's body was becoming unbearable. But she couldn't kiss him again! She wouldn't allow herself to. The knot in her stomach burst, and she quickly brought his hand to her breast. "Oh, God," she whispered. "Touch me."

He snatched his hand back, holding it as though it had been burned. "Miss Granger," he said, putting as much authority in his voice as he could muster. "This is hardly appropriate." A pause, as he finally conceded: "I believe I need to hear more about what happened when you were alone in the library."

"I'll tell you anything you want, just keep touching me," she gasped and grabbed his hand again. "Please." Her face was burning, and her breath came heavy in slightly-parted lips. "I'm going crazy."

He could see it. Her cheeks were flushed red-pink, and her eyes had a glaze in them that he'd never seen there before. Her hair was beginning to look frazzled, and--he confirmed in a quick sweep of her figure; completely detached, of course--her body was at full attention.

This from the student who called me "unjust" and "hateful" not twelve hours ago, he mused. What the hell was going on? His brow furrowed slightly in thought. He had a bit of an idea as to what might have happened, but he needed proof. It was important that he heard every detail of her story.

Sighing in exasperation, he gave her his hand again. "Discretion," he murmured, and was determined not to look at his hand again.

She placed his hand on her stomach, and he could feel it rise and fall with her shaking breaths; very shortly after the initial contact he could feel her stomach muscles flutter and tighten under his touch. She was definitely entering some state of arousal, he mused.

"Tell me more about the library," he said, collected.

"I was on my way to meet Harry and Ron," she recalled, much more cooperative now that he had some sort of physical contact with her. "...I like the statues in the library. I stopped to look at them. You, of course, penalized me for that." She heard him huff, and she continued. "When you left...something hit me. It was..." Her eyes widened as understanding grabbed her. "It was a Water Wonder!"

"A what?"

"Ron's brothers...Fred and George. They sent Ron these balloons with enchantments in them. When it's hot, you fill the balloons with water and throw them at people. It

helps to cool you off."

Snape snorted. "Obviously not a wizard game."

"This is Fred and George's doing, then!" she exclaimed before becoming silent. "...No," she added after a moment. "No. They wouldn't do something like this. They like playing pranks, but nothing that would be this serious." She unconsciously moved his hand to her hip. He said nothing.

"Do you have any of this...Water Wonder...left? Remnants, perhaps?"

Hermione shook her head. "No." A pause, then: "Maybe there's something left where I was at the library? I know there weren't any pieces left of it in my hair, but the balloon had to land somewhere."

Snape finally took his hand back and fixed her with a stare. "Stay in here," he ordered. "I'm going to search the library."

"Why do I have to stay?"

"You're still in detention. And you'll finish cleaning and organizing my private stores." His eyes narrowed. "And, Miss Granger, I know exactly what I have in these stores. I wouldn't want to find myself suddenly low on Boomslang skin...again." He took a small bit of pride from her start. "You will remain here until I return." He turned heel and headed out of the dungeons towards the library.

Due to his brisk, long strides, Snape made the trip to the library in very little time. He stopped dead in his tracks in front of one of the statues. His nostrils flared slightly.

Dark magic. The stench was everywhere.

As he searched around for some sort of remnant from this--what was it? Water Weasley? No. Wonder--his mind picked through the puzzle.

Had Granger been the innocent victim of a dark attack? It was entirely probable, he surmised, but highly questionable. Why single out Hermione Granger? Certainly, she was closer to Potter than most of the students in the school; but then, so was her friend Weasley, and he was a pureblooded wizard to boot. If the attacker wanted to control someone close to Potter, Weasley would be the better choice. He undoubtedly spent more time around Potter, and--he thought with a smirk--would be easier to control, due to lack of superior intelligence.

His lips twitched into a momentary frown as he thought his reasoning over again.

Was it possible that the potion had not been merely a controlling one? He remembered Granger's actions in the library as well as in the dungeons. She was definitely aroused by his touch. And since he was positive she had never shown him favorable attention before this...incident, her reactions were definitely crucial in consideration.

Snape stopped his search as his thoughts overran his mind.

Granger had been hit with a lust potion.

Not simply a common lust potion. The effects had yet to wear off, and lust potions were notorious for not lasting more than a few hours. Granger had said her flesh burned everywhere that the potion had touched. His physical contact with her wasn't just inconvenient...somehow, it was vital. She was able to function better in the dungeons when he had been touching her. She also said that when she was around him, she wasn't in control of her body anymore. And the fact that he could smell the dark magic, half a day later, when he reentered the library.

Something was seriously wrong.

Snape still couldn't figure out why someone would target Hermione Granger. For the rest of the day, he had kept an eye on her following their encounter in the library, but she hadn't reacted as she had with him with anyone else. Could a lust potion be keyed to make the recipient respond to a certain person? He couldn't think of any. Nor could he think of any ingredients that would produce and govern such specific responses.

Ingredients. Of course. The viperfish essence.

Viperfish essence allowed the mind to remain sharp while relaxing the body. Given Granger's description of the split of her mind and body, it was logical to deduce that whoever had stolen his viperfish essence had used it in the potion used to hit Granger.

That still left the question of where he fit into the equation.

Did the maker of the potion simply wish to get Granger away from Potter? It made sense; but then, why target him? Was it possible that he had been in the wrong place at the wrong time? Was she supposed to have run into someone else? Snape took in a sharp breath at the consequences of that. He was definitely dealing with something much more than a foolish student prank.

And, after all, the only real way to deal with a lust potion was...

Shaking his head in an attempt to clear it, Snape continued his search of the library, focusing his mind on the search instead. It wasn't without its rewards, for soon he came upon a small piece of the Water Wonder tucked away in a niche of one of the statues. Easily overlooked.

Abandoning hope of finding anything more, Snape wrapped his cloak over his hand and plucked up the bit of material. Looking around him, he sniffed at the air again before making his way back down to the dungeons.

She was sitting when he returned, idly flipping through one of his books. Hearing his entrance, she placed the book aside, stood and ran to him.

"Did you find anything?" she asked anxiously, eyes wide and fingers unconsciously stroking his robes.

He pushed past her and moved to get brewing supplies. "Yes, I believe I have," he answered, "but it needs to be tested."

"And?" She stood with her hands on her hips, head cocked in inquiry.

Snape dropped the bit of Water Wonder on the desk as he set up his supplies. She crossed to the table and peered down at it. "That's it?" she asked, amazed. "You were gone that long, and that's all you found?"

The sneer was back. "There wasn't much left," he retorted. "Besides, that is more than enough."

"What exactly do you plan on doing?"

He fixed her with a glare and saw her cheeks flush and her breath hitch. Interesting. "It seems, Miss Granger, that one of the consequences of your condition is a sharp decline in logic and reasoning. One would think you were trying to be more like your fellow Gryffindors."

Hermione narrowed her eyes in disgust as her breathing became heavy. "How are we going to test it, then?"

"We are not going to do anything. You are to go back to your chambers while I run the tests."

"Don't be foolish," she stated. "I should run the tests; I've already been affected by the potion." At his surprise, she continued, "It is a potion, isn't it? It's too coincidental; your stores of viperfish get stolen, and I get hit by something that absorbs into and burns my skin. Add to that the fact that you said I smelled of viperfish."

"Indeed," he confirmed. "But I stand by my decision. You insult my intelligence, Miss Granger. I had no problem carrying this back from the library. Here it will be placed into a cauldron and not touched. As you can see, your presence is quite unneeded."

"But I--"

"Miss Granger, I have far more important things to think about than you."

They locked in a silent stand-off for what felt like years. Finally, she broke her gaze away and turned away from him. "Goodnight, then, Professor." She quietly walked through the door and closed it behind her, eventually leaving when she was certain that he would not be calling her back.

His words echoed in her head as she walked up the stairs towards her room. Mentally, she couldn't be happier. He didn't respond to her fawning; he was perfectly able to deflect her advances. Physically, however, she was extremely frustrated: he would not bed her. Everything her logic revealed in made her body shriek in agony. She both hated and loved the way she reacted to his proximity.

There could be far worse people to be drawn to by the effects of a lust potion; she wasn't quite sure her friendships with Ron or Harry would have lasted had they been the unfortunate targets of her compulsory affection. Perhaps it would have been strained, she reasoned, considering that she had no doubt they would be willing to...apply the remedy, as it were.

Professor Snape, however, was far too much a...gentleman?...to do the same. She shook her head unconsciously; "gentleman" wasn't the right word. He was too practical. Of course; why wouldn't he be? She was obviously a student, and this was the seventh year he was her Potions professor.

He was no Gilderoy Lockhart, she thought with a smirk, though they did have one thing in common: they both stood out in a crowd. Snape was always recognizable with his shoulder-length greasy black hair; she had, years ago, hypothesized that he either didn't wash it, or it was the permanent result of years spent bent over a bubbling cauldron. He was also the owner of piercing beetle-black eyes which seemed devoid of any sort of humor or light. Add in the hooked nose and sallow complexion and one could say he was almost...vampiric.

Despite this, she had to admit that he was not entirely unattractive physically. Tall, slim and lithe, yet toned and muscular; of this she had no doubt. Although his eyes lacked the friendly twinkle of Dumbledore's, they were still intense, and had caused Hermione's breath to catch several times throughout the years.

And, of course, she admired the man for his intellect. The title of Master in any wizarding field was extremely difficult to obtain, and yet he seemed to brush it aside as though it were nothing. He had shelves filled with books in his private labs; she was certain there were more in his chambers. When he had left for the library that evening, she had taken the time to browse the shelves and was pleased to note that they were not just Potions-related; Professor Snape was extremely well-read. She was quite certain that, if ever given the chance, they could have friendly discord about...well, anything.

And the fact that he would be conversing in that silken voice isn't entirely unappealing, her mind volunteered.

Hermione reached her rooms and realized that her thoughts of Snape had left her quite flustered. A shower was definitely in order.

Snape scowled as the liquid in the vial evaporated and turned a cloudy gray.

He had tested the Water Wonder well into the night and following morning, and his efforts had been absolutely fruitless. He was no closer to finding out the potion Granger had been doused in than he had been when she had kissed him.

There was nothing left for him to test.

His temper got the best of him, and he smashed the vial against the wall, the pieces falling into the cracks between the stones. He ran a hand through his hair and muttered a quick *Reparo* before stalking to his bookshelves and scanning the titles. It was, he knew, futile: he knew the exact contents of every book on the shelves. He had pored through them so many times over the years that the pages were worn and battered.

A pang in his stomach made him question how long it had been since he'd last eaten. A quick glance at the clock confirmed that breakfast was being served in the Great Hall; after a quick change of clothing, he strode out of the dungeons towards breakfast.

From his vantage point at the Head Table, Snape noticed almost immediately that Hermione Granger was nowhere to be found in the Great Hall. Scanning the Gryffindor table, he noted that Potter and Weasley were chatting; nothing to do with classes, he thought with a hint of a scoff. Having finished with his meal, he rose and leisurely made his way to the Gryffindor table, stopping when he reached the two boys. Eyes widened, they ended their conversation and looked up at him.

"Mister Potter, Mister Weasley," he sneered. "Surely even you would not be up to something this early in the morning? The noticeable lack of Miss Granger, however, leads me to believe otherwise. Is she, perhaps, pilfering from my private stores again?"

Ron's shoulders stiffened involuntarily; Harry kept calm and replied. "No sir," he answered. "Hermione went to the library last night. We haven't seen her this morning; we assumed she was having a bit of a lie-in."

Snape raised his chin slightly, his desired information obtained. "I'm keeping an eye on you, Mister Potter, Mister Weasley. I would hope, for your sake, that you are indeed speaking the truth. I, for one, would not enjoy the consequences of lying to one's Professor."

With that, Snape turned heel and, in a billow of robes, left the Great Hall for the library.

He found her in the Restricted Section. Her head was cradled in her arms, her breathing light and even. She was asleep. Tomes of old, dusty books were scattered over the table. Snape peered at some of the titles. *Moste Horriblee Potente Potionnes. Properties of Complex Potions. Legal/Illegal: Dubious Potions Ingredients.* His gaze traveled to the rolls of parchment in front of her; he picked one up and scanned his eyes across it: detailed, copious notes from the texts before her with an emphasis on love and lust potions, as well as various questionable ingredients and their properties.

She didn't like their situation any more than he did.

Snape snorted lightly. Of course she didn't. He was nearly twice her age and hardly a good looking man; he was well aware that Gilderoy Lockhart--in his current state--on his worst day was still far more attractive than he. His personality was nothing less than non-existent, and when he spoke he was curt at best. Not to mention the ever-

present Gryffindor/Slytherin clash.

Reluctantly, he had to give her credit for her persistence. He knew too many students who would give up if placed in her situation, who would resign themselves to being ever-attracted to their hideous, cruel Potions professor. He should have expected nothing less from Granger; she was actively trying to find a cure as much as he.

Neither he nor his door had been hit with hexes, so he surmised that she had kept their condition secret. He held no illusions that Potter and Weasley would have made some sort of half-considered "rescue" attempt to save the third member of their trio from the wicked clutches of evil Professor Snape. There was, of course, hostility seething from them at breakfast; this was, however, normal.

Hermione began to stir, and he put the roll of parchment back on the desk in front of her.

"Oh!" she exclaimed softly upon catching sight of him. "Professor Snape!" She looked around her, confused for a moment, before comprehension set in. "I must have fallen asleep."

"I do worry, Miss Granger, that your intelligence does not seem to override your penchant for unnecessary statements."

Deciding to ignore his declaration, Hermione indulged in a stretch before rising from the chair, wincing a bit as she worked a particularly nasty kink out of her neck. Gathering the rolls of parchment, she hesitated before offering them in his direction.

"I...made research notes. On potions ingredients. I thought they might help you. With the tests."

"Miss Granger, I can assure you that I know whatever it is you have written in those notes." Hermione's face fell, almost imperceptibly. He, however, noticed. "Be that as it may," he said grudgingly, "I must admit I admire your dedication to finding a cure." A lengthy pause settled between them before he finally finished. "I would not be averse to your participation in this research."

Hermione bit back a smile; it was the closest to a request for help she was sure she would ever get from him. She nodded, and after putting the parchment back on the table, began to gather the books.

"You may leave those, Miss Granger," he said. "You will be late to your first class if you do not hurry. I would rather not have to listen to Professor McGonagall's laments about how her star pupil was tardy for her class." He thought for a moment, then added, "Meet me here after dinner. We shall begin work immediately."

Once again, Hermione nodded, and pushing the parchment in her bag, slung it over her shoulder and walked out of the library.

They spent the evening in the Restricted Section, poring over every Potions book in it.

They had quickly found--much to Hermione's dismay--that most of the stronger lust potions contained viperfish essence. She arrested the urge to panic, however, by letting her analytical mind kick in.

"I don't think it's any of these," she stated, gesturing to the books before her.

He looked up from his seat across the table. "Giving up already?"

She shook her head. "No...I just haven't experienced these--um--effects." Snape took a slight morose pleasure in her discomfort. "It's been a few days, and from what these books say, any lust potion takes effect almost immediately and wears off in a few hours." She shifted in her seat. "It--um--hasn't." He raised his eyebrow in--amusement? Hermione felt the heat rising to her cheeks and forced herself to continue. "Besides...what I'm experiencing isn't as intense as these potions I've read about. In fact, it's waned since the first day." She unconsciously looked at the area where he had "caught" her.

Snape sighed and briefly pinched his nose. "I must confess to thinking along those lines, Miss Granger," he admitted and pushed his book away in frustration. "I find myself at a loss as to how to proceed from here. I've never seen a potion like this."

Hermione put a sympathetic hand on his; it twitched, but he did not remove it.

"Is it really such a bad thing?" She caressed the back of his hand with her thumb. "Maybe we should just give up," she offered in a low voice. Snape's eyes flashed, and he pulled away quickly.

Hermione stood, crossed slowly behind him, and began to knead his knotted shoulders. He tensed under her touch but allowed her to continue her ministrations. "I mean," she continued, "look at us. You can control yourself. I can control myself. We can just spend time alone together outside of class. Like this." She quit her massage and leaned in close to his head. "And maybe," she cooed into his ear, "work on the quick and practical solution to my problem."

Snape pushed his chair away forcefully, knocking her to the ground. He shot to his feet and glared at her. Opening his mouth to unleash nine levels of holy hell directly at her, the words caught in his throat as he saw her eyes.

They were completely dilated and dark violet.

"Miss Granger," he finally managed, and stooped to grab her shoulders. Shaking her, he said her name again. His grip tightened, and he shook her again.

Hermione's eyelids fluttered, and suddenly Snape found himself staring into alert brown eyes.

"Professor Snape?" she inquired, looking at his hands in confusion. He didn't release his hold. "What am I doing on the floor?"

His eyes narrowed. "You don't remember." It was a realization. His grip on her arms tightened.

Hermione shook her head. "No. I remember...I put my hand on yours. And then...my head went light; everything was fuzzy. And then I heard your voice, and I found myself on the floor like this." She licked her lips and winced. "You're hurting me."

Immediately, Snape dropped his hands and stood. He did not apologize, nor did he offer to help her to her feet. Rather, he paced the Restricted Section, lost in thought.

Hermione rose, shaken, and righted the fallen chair. She had found, early on in her life, that she found quiet comfort in doing actions that she could control, especially in uncontrollable situations, such as that she was currently in. Gathering the books strewn across the table, she began to shelve them in their proper places.

"I have an idea," he said finally, "of the potion that's affecting you."

She pushed the last book into its rightful spot on the shelf. Her silence asked her question; she would wait for him to speak again.

"I don't know what it is," he admitted, and it seemed to pain him to do so. "It's dark, for certain--and given your eyes a moment ago, highly potent."

"My eyes?"

Snape finally looked at her. "All dark potions have physical signs," he said, and she nodded; she already knew. "What these books don't tell you--because they don't know--is exactly how. Your eyes were dark violet and completely dilated. They were glazed over; almost as if you were...empty. Yet you were able to speak coherently, and your

motions were smooth. Whatever that potion is...it's capable of controlling you."

Hermione drew a worried lip into her mouth. "So how can I stop it?" At his silence: "*Can* I stop it?"

Snape scowled. "I don't know. I abhor not knowing."

"Is there nothing we can do?"

"Nothing in this library can help us," he stated bluntly. "I need to owl a...friend. I will keep in contact with you. And do try not to have a repeat performance of today's events. Good evening, Miss Granger." With that, he stalked out of the library.

Hermione waited several minutes before departing. From what his description of her implied, she would do well to stay away from him.

Snape stole into the dark grounds of Hogwarts, pulling his cloak around him to ensure it was firmly in place. Slipping through the heavy iron gates, he stalked down the path towards Hogsmeade a bit more before veering off into a small patch of trees and Disapparating.

He reemerged in front of Malfoy manor and rapped on the massive door. Several moments passed before a house-elf, obviously straining with the effort, slowly pulled the door open.

"Yes, sir?" it inquired, bowing slightly.

Snape's eyes narrowed at the sight of the unfamiliar house-elf. Of course, he finally remembered. Dobby, Lucius' farce of a former house-elf had been freed by that infernal Potter and now worked in the kitchens of Hogwarts, amassing a veritable cache of mismatched socks.

"I'm here to speak with Lucius Malfoy," he stated, raising his chin.

"Master is in his study," the elf replied, bobbing its head. "Master does not wish to be disturbed. Master told Tilly so."

"Tell Lucius that an old friend is here to see him," he demanded. "Severus Snape."

Tilly bobbed his head again and stepped aside to allow Snape to enter. Taking several moments to push the door shut, Tilly bowed and wrung nervous fingers together. "If honored guest would please wait while Tilly informs Master..." he started, and Snape dismissed the house-elf with a wave of his hand. Tilly scurried up the stairs.

Snape idly gazed around the open lobby, smirking at the house-elf-sized handles discreetly placed on every door. The sight of Malfoy manor evoked past memories he would rather have forgotten completely. How many people had died in this place? Witches and wizards who had no idea that "dinner and a friendly chat" consisted of repetitions of Cruciatius before the eventual administering of the Killing Curse.

Snape had usually been the one to dispose of the mangled corpses. He supposed he was lucky in that respect: damage control was usually too busy to actively participate in torture sessions.

Usually.

He wondered how many of the bodies still resided under the house.

Snape's thoughts were broken by the return of Tilly, who was bandaging the fingers of one hand.

"Master will see Mister Snape," the squeaky voice informed him. "Please to be following Tilly."

The house-elf directed Snape through Malfoy manor, finally stopping in front of an oak door. "Master is expecting Mister Snape," Tilly said, bobbing his head once more.

Snape grunted in acknowledgement and opened the door.

"Severus!" Lucius greeted, holding out a snifter of brandy. "Do come in."

Snape once again mentally cursed the buffoons working in Azkaban; money and lawyers and trumped-up "witnesses" had ensured that Lucius Malfoy had been released from Azkaban within a year of his capture, cited under "insufficient and/or circumstantial evidence."

He closed the door and draped his cloak on a hook in the corner. He took the brandy, sitting in one of the chairs. As Lucius moved to sit in the other, Snape discreetly sniffed at his drink. Lucius was no stranger to potion-brewing, and Snape wouldn't be surprised to find that his brandy had been spiked.

Quite frankly, Snape trusted that damn fool Potter more than Lucius.

"What brings you here, Severus?" Lucius asked, sipping from his brandy. "To travel so far...couldn't you have Flooed?"

"The Floo networks at Hogwarts are constantly monitored," he replied, "and I did not want to risk an owl being intercepted." He rubbed his left forearm meaningfully.

The action was not lost on Lucius, whose eyes darkened slightly. "I understand. What do you need?"

"I wish to consult your potions books," he replied, lifting a chin to one of the bookshelves across the room. "I want to research untraceable potions."

Lucius' eyes narrowed. "Surely you--of all of us--know more about those kinds of potions?"

Snape shook his head. "There are still gaps in my memory, Lucius," he confessed, "and potions I do not know. Your library is extensive; I deduced I could find my answers here."

Lucius studied Snape for a moment before finally nodding. "I trust you'll find something useful. I assume your research will serve the Dark Lord?"

"Of course." He paused a moment and watched Lucius refill his brandy. His eyes narrowed as an idea took form. "If you would show me which books are potions books?"

"Certainly." Lucius put the snifter on the table and walked to the bookshelves. Bringing up the rear, Snape placed his glass down on the table by his own chair. Crossing to the indicated bookshelf, he scanned its contents with slender fingers before finally finding his desired tome and pulling it out. Bringing the book back to the chair, he began to flip through it.

"You haven't touched your brandy, Severus." Lucius' voice broke through the silence. Snape looked up from the half-read book in his lap--how long had he been reading?

"I'm simply not in the mood for brandy, Lucius."

He scoffed. "Nonsense." He raised his snifter. "To the Dark Lord."

Snape raised his glass in kind; there was no way out of it. "To the Dark Lord," he repeated and took a sip. Letting the brandy sit on his tongue a moment, he tasted it for

any sort of foreign content. It was clean.

Curious.

Snape put his brandy on the table and continued poring through the contents of the book.

"How is my son? Surely the head of Slytherin?" Another sip of brandy.

"To be sure, Lucius." He continued to devour the information in the book; he wanted to leave Malfoy manor as soon as possible. He was quite certain he could still hear the screams of tortured wizards coming from underneath the floorboards. "Young Draco is one of Slytherin's greatest assets. No doubt he will become much like you."

Lucius preened at Snape's statement. "Of course. I raised him well." More brandy. "And it just shows that the Dark Lord is right; pureblooded wizards are supreme in the magical world. Apparently the fact is making itself known at Hogwarts as well. We have quite a selection of junior Death Eaters at that school."

"I shall watch over them, Lucius," Snape said, snapping the book closed and rising to return it to its place on the shelf. "When the Dark Lord commands me to take them under my guidance, I shall do that as well."

Lucius stood, finishing his brandy. "I have already taken one," he stated, placing his empty snifter on the mantle of the fireplace. "Quite loyal, actually. I have faith in this one. The Dark Lord will not want for younger Death Eaters. Impressionable minds."

Snape grabbed his cloak from its resting place and wrapped it around his body, bringing his eyes up to meet Lucius'. "I must get back to Hogwarts," he said simply. "I have patrol. The foolish Headmaster will not take kindly to my sudden absence."

Lucius nodded, although Snape noticed the action was not as controlled as normal. Was he drunk?

"You don't need to see me out, Lucius," he continued. "I trust you have not put Apparition wards against the house?"

Lucius' grin was slightly unnerving. "You know me too well, old friend." He waved a hand dismissively. "Go right ahead. Do keep me informed of Draco's progress."

"That I shall," Snape replied in parting, and Disapparated.

Staring at the space that Snape had just occupied with narrowed gaze, Lucius muttered a quick Accio and held his hands open. A book fell into them--the one Snape had been reading just moments before.

Lust potions?

What would Severus Snape be doing researching lust potions?

Shelving the book, Lucius poured himself another glass of brandy. He was determined to find out.

Snape paced his office, robes constantly winding about as his heavy strides changed directions. Information burned rapid-fire through his mind, as he tried to make sense of the situation he found himself in.

Fact: Two days ago, Hermione Granger had been the target of a particularly potent lust potion.

Fact: He was the recipient of her affections, though not by design.

Fact: Despite seemingly endless research, they were no closer to divining what potion Granger had been dosed with.

Fact: Lucius Malfoy had at least one junior Death Eater within the walls of Hogwarts.

That was what got to him, Snape realized as he stopped pacing and ran a hand through his limp locks. He would now have to toe an even thinner line in what he did and did not report to the Dark Lord; if someone else was doing the same, the stories had better coincide, or one or the both would be killed. Of this he had no doubt.

And what about Granger's reaction in the library? his mind proffered. Don't forget that this potion works to actually *control* the target as well.

Quite right. And given that, what was the purpose for this potion? Why would someone not only want the Gryffindor Know-It-All to lust after them but also desire to physically control her as well?

He had to find out. But who could he possibly ask?

Scowling, he crossed to his desk and pulled out a small bag of powder. Walking to the fireplace, he threw in a handful and barked out Hermione's name. An instant later, her head appeared in his fireplace.

"Yes, Professor?"

They're monitored, his mind supplied. Word your phrases well. "I require your help in potions research," he stated. "Come down to my office at once."

"I'll be there as soon as I can, Professor Snape."

It took her ten minutes.

Unbeknownst to Hermione Granger, a pair of eyes watched her from the dark as she stepped out of the portrait marking the entrance to her room and walked calmly down the hallway. Nor did she immediately notice that the owner of said eyes was in fact following her, cloaked in shadows, as she strolled towards the Entrance Hall. Finally feeling the eyes on her back, she turned and peered around the darkened hallway.

"Is anyone there?" she queried, before pulling out her wand and muttering "Lumos." Light pooled from her wand, and the figure in the shadows beat a hasty retreat.

It was of no consequence. He would approach her soon enough. And the potion mishap would be rectified. The Dark Lord would be pleased.

"Were you in the Entrance Hall just a moment ago?" she asked, closing the door.

Snape looked up from an his text. "Why would I possibly care to be there?"

"I could have sworn I felt someone watching me. Following me."

Snape's eyes narrowed as he rose and walked to the door, opening it and peering about. After a moment, he withdrew, closed the door, and cast a ward or two. "I felt nothing," he proclaimed.

Hermione shook her head. "It was probably nothing," she conceded. "Perhaps I'm just tired." Ignoring Snape's inquiring eyebrow, she crossed to the chair he had been occupying and peered down at the magazine. Wasting no time, she moved to the stack of back issues of various potions periodicals and pulled several out, settling down in another chair and beginning to read, looking for any traces of lust potions.

Snape sat back down and picked up his abandoned reading. They sat in silence for quite a while, poring over endless potions texts and periodicals when he suddenly drew in a sharp breath through clenched teeth, clutching his left forearm.

Hermione's eyes widened as she set aside her text. "Are you all right?"

"Go back to your chambers," he ordered and entered his. Pulling the heavy black robe from its hiding spot, he changed into it and grabbed the accompanying mask. Walking back into his office, he was surprised and angered to see that Hermione had not moved.

"I told you to leave," he said gruffly.

Hermione's eyes were still wide and he scoffed. "I would have thought you would be smart enough to follow a simple command," he said, eyebrow raised.

Unblinking, Hermione thrust her left arm at him, and Snape sneered at what he saw: a replica of the Dark Mark, seared in red into her forearm.

"Stay here," he finally said, "and keep reading. We'll speak after the meeting." With that, he pushed away from her and stalked out of the dungeons.

Idly rubbing at her forearm, Hermione watched him leave and then began to pace the room, gathering her thoughts. This was, she reasoned, an effect of the potion. It had to be; she could think of no other reason the Dark Mark would show on her arm. But why was it red, almost as a rash? She had seen a drawing of the Dark Mark, had even seen it on Snape's arm. His was black and well-defined. Why the difference?

Some time after Snape had left, Hermione's body began to tingle; she thought nothing of it until tingling became cramping became pain. Clutching her arms around her stomach, she dropped to her knees and groaned. The pain increased, and she finally lost consciousness.

When she awoke, she was in bed with Snape hovering above her.